

# ***'I'll vote for you, bro!!!'; Pierre Poilievre is poised to become the next federal Tory leader - and young voters are suddenly interested in his party***

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## **Body**

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"Our next prime minister."

"I'll vote for you, bro!!!"

"This guy is Canada's future."

Those are the kinds of comments NDP Leader Jagmeet Singh used to get on his TikTok videos. Users of the app - a youth favourite - would reply to the leader's viral clips, begging him to unseat Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and change the way politics is done in Canada. Orange heart emojis would sometimes follow.

But those comments aren't from Singh's profile. They're scattered beneath presumed Conservative leadership front-runner Pierre Poilievre's TikTok videos. And now, the heart emojis are blue.

For the first time since the federal Conservatives were in power, the party is becoming more competitive with younger voters, recent polling from Abacus Data suggests. In February, the month former leader Erin O'Toole was ousted, a national survey of 5,200 adults found that if a general election were held then, 24 per cent of Canadians aged 18 to 29 would vote Conservative, compared to 32 per cent for the Liberals and 24 per cent for the NDP.

By July, the polling firm reported that based on a national survey of 2,400 adults, 31 per cent of young adults would vote Conservative, compared to 29 per cent for the Liberals and 21 per cent for the NDP. For a comparable probability-based sample of this size, the margin of error was plus or minus two percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

But is that a sign the Tories are fully capturing the youth vote?

"They aren't dominating young people, but I think it's a signal that for whatever reason - and there could be multiple factors that explain this - the Conservatives are being considered by more young people than they have in the recent past," Abacus Data CEO David Coletto told the Star.

There's a convergence of two factors in particular, Coletto said, that might shed light on this trend.

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One is a growing dissatisfaction with the incumbent Liberals, a party he said is typically "far more likely" to attract younger voters, along with other left-leaning parties. The second is a Conservative leadership contest that has positioned Poilievre, 43, as an attractive alternative amid this backdrop of political discontent.

"That frustration that I think a lot of young people are feeling around housing, around changes in the economy, maybe feeling left behind - I think they're looking for somebody ... to help explain why," Coletto said.

"I think Mr. Poilievre has done that in a way that ... no Conservative candidate for leader - and if he's going to win in a few weeks, Conservative leader - has done effectively."

Poilievre's campaign did not respond to the Star's requests to discuss its outreach to Gen Z and younger millennials, but his social media presence and campus rallies suggest it is something of a focus.

The leadership contender has carved a path for himself as a compelling communicator on Twitter, posting videos where he uses a breakfast table to illustrate the toll of inflation or old, wooden beams to discuss "reclaiming" Canada's freedoms.

Other clips feature young Canadians prominently, whether they are teenage card-carrying members or early-career professionals plotting their futures. In one video, Poilievre drops into a downtown Vancouver nightclub for a rally, joking to clubgoers it's not a venue where people like him are typically found.

Shift among students?

On university campuses, conservative-minded students say there's excitement in the air.

"If young people don't get involved in politics, politics is going to get involved in them. And so a lot of people are starting to take up some interest in what's going on in their country, and they seem to be resonating with the message that Pierre is spreading," said Connor Hollingshead, who until recently led Simon Fraser University's campus Conservative club.

That message is one based on freedom, a concept Hollingshead said evaded many young Canadians during the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw youth lose out on experiences critical to their personal and professional lives.

Another is Poilievre's focus on affordability and the rising cost of living, issues the 21-year-old political science student says extend beyond conservative circles.

"I would say an overwhelming majority (of my friends) would not align themselves with our party, pre-Poilievre," Hollingshead said.

"Today they come to me and say, 'You know, I think that you guys will probably be my choice next time,' because ... they've looked at the last seven years and they've seen no action on the issues they care about."

A rally with Poilievre co-hosted by SFU and the University of British Columbia this spring drew about 250 people - the largest student Conservative event since former leadership hopeful Kevin O'Leary appeared at UBC in 2017.

(Hollingshead said all current leadership candidates were invited to campus, but only Leslyn Lewis - whose event attracted about 30 people - accepted the offer.)

Several months later, the energy and passion Hollingshead saw saturating that crowd were repeated at an event held by the University of Calgary's campus Conservatives.

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It was the first time the group sold out an event, said president Leam Dunn-Opper - who is not endorsing a candidate in the race - and it only happened because Poilievre's team was "extraordinary" in its efforts to make the rally a reality.

He said Poilievre spoke about housing, protecting freedom of speech, and his own time at the university, where the longtime MP studied international relations and became a finalist in an essay-writing contest about what he would do if he ever became prime minister.

"I think the Liberals and the NDP are in for a shock when it comes to the youth vote," Dunn-Opper said, adding that he's met young people who previously aligned themselves with those parties and are now looking to park their vote somewhere else.

Coletto said the Conservative gains have come, in part, at the expense of the Liberals and New Democrats.

In a statement to the Star, the Liberal Party of Canada said it was "constantly finding new and innovative ways to speak to and engage with young voters.

"We're also taking bold steps to fight climate change, grow our economy and create jobs, and strengthen gun controls to make our communities safer," Liberal communications director Parker Lund wrote.

"For 10 years, the Conservatives turned their backs on young Canadians and now their leadership candidates are pushing risky policies that would take us backward."

The NDP, meanwhile, has spared some thought as to how it would spin a Poilievre victory to the country's youngest voters.

"He's been elected since he was in his 20s. He's made six-figure salaries since he was in his 20s. He has gotten a pension for life since he was in his 20s and the solutions that he's putting forward in reality don't actually put money back in people's pockets," said Mélanie Richer, Singh's director of communications.

"He's not ever had to work three jobs to get by. And we know that Trudeau hasn't either, and our job in the next little bit will be to show that when Jagmeet was in his 20s, he was working three jobs. When Jagmeet was in his 20s, he was raising his teenage brother and getting friends to help out with groceries because he couldn't afford groceries."

Richer also said young people defecting to the Tories isn't a sentiment that's surfaced among the NDP's membership or on the party's social media platforms.

But if all roads lead back to TikTok, there's evidence the decision to join forces with the Liberals did little to boost Singh's popularity.

His account - which still boasts nearly 887,000 followers to Poilievre's 60,000 - is now littered with comments branding the NDP leader a sellout, along with occasional taunts that users' next votes will be going to the Conservatives.

'Short memories'

Yet it is also a byproduct of the Liberal-NDP pact that could bury one of Poilievre's biggest drawbacks among youth: his support of the so-called "Freedom Convoy" movement that occupied downtown Ottawa for weeks last winter. Poilievre backed the demonstration's message of "freedom, not fear," despite organizers' stated goal of

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overthrowing the government, and has since associated with figures linked to the both the convoy and far-right groups.

"If we don't have an election until 2025 or whenever the end is for the deal, then I don't think his convoy support matters at all," said Shiv Ruparell, a 25-year-old Conservative strategist who says that while some young Canadians opposed the convoy, many agreed with the sentiments behind it.

"Voters have short memories. People will move on and forget and they're not going to care about it."

Ruparell also said it's not particularly concerning that climate change and diversity - topics youth tend to feel strongly about - aren't issues Poilievre is known for touting.

"I think for the first time young voters who were virtue signalling on the environment, appropriately so, are now saying, 'OK, I now have to make a sacrifice. I can't have it both ways. I can't keep living my lifestyle and have action on the environment,'" said Ruparell, who considers himself both conservative and a climate activist.

"I think that a unique combination of economic factors, global market factors, and the pandemic is now forcing them to make this choice earlier."

As for Dunn-Opper, what really matters is how "electric" the room became in Calgary that Sunday afternoon when Poilievre came to visit.

"Conservatives have been historically touted as an older crowd," the fifth-year student said. "Pierre is sort of changing that, with a lot of people believing in him, believing in his message. It's something I haven't seen in a long time."

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